

**Reflection on the Gospel-5th Sunday of Lent Year C
(John 8:1-11)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

Historian Gerda Lerner has demonstrated that patriarchy emerged some 3000 years ago with the emergence of weapons of war and the consequent gender division of labour. By the first century CE, when the gospels were written, every woman in the Roman world knew what that she was the possession of a man, initially of her father, and then of her husband or successive husbands. Slaves, both men and women, were the property of and sexually available to the head of the patriarchal household. Even free women had fewer choices than men in regard to such matters as choice of life partners and social contact outside the family. In the context of Second Temple Judaism, a woman's sexual liaison with another man was a sin against her husband who was also her proprietor. Her shame was of less consequence than her husband's loss of status and honour.

We are told nothing of the precise circumstances of the woman said to be "taken in adultery". She could not have been "taken" alone: there is a man somewhere in the wings who is at least as guilty as the woman. But only the woman is "brought" to Jesus in the public arena, a spectacle for the assembled crowd. Ironically, the lawyers have little interest in the woman or her fate. Their interest is in Jesus. They want to test him and catch him out on his attitude to and enactment of the Mosaic law. In other words, Jesus is the one on trial in this public setting, and the woman is no more than a dispensable object in the process, a means to a sinister end.

The woman's life is of little concern to her accusers. They ask Jesus for a legal opinion on her case. Should the full force of the law be exercised? Should she be stoned to death? Jesus does not dignify their manipulation with a response. Rather, he takes away their power over the woman by bending down and writing with his finger on the ground. What does he write? We can never have an answer to that question. They keep asking him to provide a ruling.

Jesus subverts their ploy by confronting them with their own sinfulness: "let the one without sin cast the first stone". They move off one by one and the woman is finally accorded the dignity of responding for herself. She is freed from the burden of condemnation. She can move forward with a strong sense of her worth and the knowledge that she matters in the scheme of things. As we bring today's gospel into dialogue with stories of violence against women, such as the horrifying stories of Yazidi women returning to their homes after years of captivity in Syria as the sex slaves of ISIS operatives, we might commit ourselves anew to the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women.